

BEFORE  
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WON

TOMAS VERES

**BEFORE  
I  
WON**

Tomas Veres

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To all of us that work hard, believe in ourselves  
and in a better future.  
Despite our families, friends and people around us shouting:  
what the f\*ck are you doing?

If you can imagine these things, and bond with them,  
I would be honored.

And if you say afterwards,  
“if Tom did it, I’ll can do it too,”  
you will be rewarded.

*The decisions you made yesterday have brought you to the place where you are today. The decisions to be made today will bring you to a different place tomorrow. Please, share with us all the decisions from your past.*

Some of us hope to make it to heaven after death. Some of us help the poor and believe that God will reward them. But as soon as I was born, and I found myself immediately in hell. I didn't get the opportunity to make something right or even to do something terrible, and look, I was already being punished. Thanks to my parents. Everything started when my mother met one guy. Then, one year later, something happened. A child named Tom Seed was born. Not as a star but as another useless piece of trash in this society.

My first days in the Montefiore Medical Center hospital were delightful. The same goes for the other newborns. I was the star for all the nurses with my green eyes and short curly blond hair. My small mouth was not able to talk yet. My weak body was not able to make any move. In spite of this, I was the one who created smiles on the faces of others. But I did not get to enjoy that pleasant place for a long time – my days in maternity hospital came to an end, and I had to go home as a healthy child with perfect parents. To a small apartment in the Bronx. The place that became my home. The place where we lived together as a real family. My mother spent entire days with me, while my father worked as parking lot attendant at a shopping mall. I had no toys to play with, but I was happy even without them because I had a loving mom who played with me all day long.

As life went on, I started to understand many things. I said my first words, took my first steps, hid my first teeth under my pillow. For me, big successes, for my parents, big issues. They didn't see me grow up – they just saw me ruining their lives and their furniture.

I never heard words like “I love you,” “thank you,” or “you are my hero”...

Instead I heard words, bad words... “you can't do anything,” “you are the biggest mistake of my life,” “even the dog's smarter than you”...

My parents shouting, that was my daily life. My mom shouted at me during the day, and in the night when dad came back from work, she shouted at him. At first I felt terrible. All the noise, all the shouting scared me. But after some time, I got used to it. I started to behave exactly like they did. I started to scream and shout like they did. I started to use the words they used. I thought

it was correct, it was right to be the same as my parents. Until I started at nursery school.

That was the moment that changed everything.



**M**y teacher held my tiny hand, took my little bag and led me away from my mother. She held my hand so strongly that she almost broke it. I did not like it at all, I wanted to stay with my mom, but she moved away, further away from me. So, I shouted. Again and again. The other children looked at me like I was a monster they had never seen before. And all of a sudden, this lady, the one who would be my teacher, hit me so hard that it made me cry.

Very painful for me, but very funny for the other kids in nursery school. Even though I stopped crying after a couple of minutes, the children laughed the whole day. Nobody took care of me ...

Nobody talked to me ...

Nobody ...

As I sat in the classroom, encircled by nothing, I heard something that made me happy again. The most important person in my life was back. My mom. She hadn't forgotten me. Finally, I was able to leave that place and never come back. On the way home, we stopped for groceries and my mom bought me a cherry flavor lollipop. I really enjoyed it, but I started to feel that something was going on, because up to that point I never got any sweets from my mom. Nothing.

This was not the only unusual thing to happen to me that day. The same bag I had with me in nursery school earlier was on the kitchen stool, ready for the next day. Curious, I asked my mom where we were going tomorrow. She told me that for the next couple of years, I'll be going to that nursery school every day like all the normal children my age.

My body was as paralyzed like a tree, while my eyes started tearing up like the sea.

I couldn't believe it. I wasn't able to accept it. I started to shout at my mom exactly like she did to my father when he comes back from work at night. But my beloved mom did something I never expected her to do. She started to pull my hair and hit me on the head. Stronger and stronger. Until I lost consciousness. I woke up only the next morning with bruises all over my body. It took me a while to realize what had happened. I wanted to say sorry to my mom, because I obviously had done something to her, otherwise she would never hit me that hard. I looked for her in every room, but I was not able to find her anywhere. She had left the apartment.

I didn't want to see my mom so upset. So I dressed, brushed my teeth, took my bag and did precisely what I had to do – I went to nursery school. I walked alone, completely scared of the outside world going on around me. On the way there I met a lot of weird people, heard many weird words and felt many weird smells. I thought my first day in nursery school was the worst. Unfortunately, I was wrong. The next days were even worse, much worse... Despite my fights with bullies, I still had to go. If I didn't do it, my mom would beat me at home.

My parents had no friends. They avoided people, and I inherited the same attitude towards people. I prefer solitude. In my class there were twenty-two students, and none of them played with me – there were some exceptions, but they also played an unfair game called bullying. I remember the day when I ended up in the hospital with cracked head because of them.

I also remember the day when the cops brought me home in a police cruiser because somebody hid my shoes and I had to walk home barefoot, with no shoes. My body suffered, my soul cried. I felt so lonely. I did not have anybody to play with and spend time with. So I took pencils and paper from off of the table, tilted my head down and left my favorite place, the dark cold corner of my classroom. I closed my eyes for a couple of minutes, and then it happened. In front of me I saw beautiful objects. I started to draw everything I saw in my mind.

The children I was so scared of before because they were much older and stronger than me, they all became part of my drawings. This was the only way to escape reality. When I drew, I drew for entire days because when I held the pencil in my hand, there was no darkness in my head any more.

I saw the beauty in my drawings, but my parents saw only the costs connected to drawing. As a poor family we were not able to afford many things. Things like paper or pencils.

I would try anything, cry, beg, dream ...

Nothing worked.

My parents simply did not have any money to spend on this. But one small act changed the whole situation. I stole a set of pencils and papers from nursery school so I could draw at home.

After I started elementary school, many things changed. A new building, new teachers, new classmates. Only one thing was still the same. I was a weirdo and this caused me a lot of issues. My nose was broken twice and my hand once. Later, I started to have problems with my grades. In the classroom, I was “the best.” I had to learn things from history, literature and other stupid things. I hated it. I honestly believed that my life was jinxed.

I had no nanny, no adult supervision. My one and only companion was an old television in the kitchen. At school I listened to boring stories about Abraham Lincoln, but at home I watched exciting stories about Pablo Escobar on TV, about the violence taking place in my surroundings. In the world-famous Bronx.

I didn't want to be a sweet boy in suit just like Abraham Lincoln. I wanted to be that tough guy, like Pablo Escobar and his companions were, with guns in the streets. I watched TV late at night because that was the only time when I could watch gangster movies. I loved them. I liked them so much that I decided to skip school. As my mom and dad worked long hours, I watched television. It didn't take long for my parents to realize something was wrong. The electricity bills were much higher than usual, but my parents also got a letter. A letter from my school with news about my absence. It took only a couple of minutes for my body to change color. They beat me.

Then they told me that we're not wealthy people. We're poor people because rich people and their families are thieves. That's why they have so much money. They stole it.

I understood why my parents beat me, but I did not understand why rich people should be so bad. Why, if they have that much money, do they not support people like me? You know. My family did not own any car, we could only afford good meat on Christmas Eve, I wore old clothes that didn't fit me.

And them?

They own luxury European cars, live in private suburbs, wear silk clothes and eat healthy and fresh meals every day.

At the age of fifteen I discovered who had jinxed my life. Rich people! They jinxed my life and my parents' lives. They have their own TV shows where they pay thousands and thousands of dollars for their children's birthday parties. They buy gold-decorated houses for their tiny dogs, bigger than my room. They are popular while people like me, the poor people of the

Bronx, are hated because the world sees us only as criminal animals on the news. Life in the Bronx is tough, my father often said. I understood what he meant. The whole time I lived in the Bronx, I've only seen a few rich people. Everybody knew well that the wealthy people live in Manhattan.

In a place filled with stars and luxury. A place just a mile away from our apartment. I couldn't concentrate, I was still thinking about the people in Manhattan enjoying life in luxury, and I became determined to get my revenge. Immediately I went to the bus stop and hopped on to the nearest bus to Manhattan.

When I got there, I felt like I was in another world. Huge modern buildings, clean streets, shops with glass windows. Everyone wore noble clothes with an unidentifiable scent ... Gold watches shone on their wrists ...

They all looked so happy there.

In this world, young people bow their heads as they played games on their phones, but in my world, young people bowed their heads because the color of their eyes showed which drugs they'd been using.

In this world, the people embraced each other on benches because they were in love. People in my world held each other because they had to keep warm.

In this world, people were walking fast because they were hurrying home to their perfect families, while in my world, people walked fast because they had just witnessed a crime.

Not a reality show on TV. Only reality. I took a deep breath and I joined the people around me. They looked kind, everyone was smiling at each other. I wanted to be loved, I wanted to be happy, I wanted to be part of that perfect world even for just a few seconds. I only needed a few seconds ...

As usual, something went wrong. The people around me who looked happy just a few moments ago with wide smiles on their faces weren't saying anything. They just walked like statues. No joy, no smiles. Then I remembered. I remembered where I saw the same expression they were wearing on their faces. The same expression the kids in the nursery school had when they looked at me like a screaming monster. I didn't need to see any more. It was enough to prove the point.

I didn't go home. I stayed there until night, when all the people went to sleep in their luxury apartments. Then, my revenge began. It was so easy. When I saw a fancy car parked along the street, I took my apartment keys and scratched it. Repeatedly. I had a great feeling after that. I had a great feeling about myself. That night I keyed more than fifteen cars.

I felt like a real gangster, a boy who belonged to the victims of violence, who had himself become part of the violence.

After a few days, I had the urge to do it again. But this time with a greater effect. I couldn't just sit so idly at home. I had to create something out of the hatred that I felt within myself. I decided to do it on a Sunday, because it does not matter what color you are, how old you are, where you live or how much money you have, all people were gathered in one place –at church.

I put only two things in my bag: a knife and spray paint. I chose the same target. Luxury cars in Manhattan parked along the street. With my mom's kitchen knife I cut all four wheels on each car. With blue paint I sprayed the message: "Thief!" I wanted to see the car owners' expressions when they woke up in the morning and see the surprise I had prepared for them. I didn't have to wait until morning. I just closed my eyes and imagined it. I enjoyed it. Until I heard a male voice shouting from a nearby street.

My heart was beating like crazy. I panicked. I started to run away. I ran as fast as I could. I could not stop. I was frightened that the guy would catch me in the act and call the police. I have no clue how, but I made it home from there. It was probably a miracle that I got home. When my adrenaline disappeared, I began to regret my act.

The fear of being discovered was stronger than the joy of revenge. I tried to forget that night, but I could not. From that moment on, I asked God for forgiveness. I promised myself that I would never do anything like that again. The next morning I went to school like usual. The same way, the same people. But things I had never noticed before started to make me mad. Car sounds, police sirens, the clock ticking, laughter ...

All these everyday things made me angry. I was afraid, and fear was destroying me. I avoided all eye contact. I stopped eating. I felt terrible.

My mind was filled with the horrible feeling of having a conscience. I was down in the dumps.

I picked up a knife from the dining room, and I went to the bathroom and locked myself in.

There, in that bathroom, I wanted to end my suffering, but I couldn't do it.

I was so weak ...

So weak ...

I was just lying there on the dirty floor like an old ship wreck on the shore, crying.

I cried till I could see a white light.

God had listened to me,

God had heard my prayers ...

Or so I thought.

Apparently, I hadn't seen the same light that people see just before death. The light I saw was coming from the flashlight of an NYPD Police Officer.

The vandal who had scratched thirty-six cars in Manhattan ended in a juvenile detention. "A young man from the Bronx who listened to too many 50 Cent songs," wrote a New York Post journalist.

As I later realized from that police officer, at the crime scene, they found a book that had fallen out of my bag during my bloody escape. Also, images from security cameras recorded my act. The police had clear evidence of my guilt. I knew it, they knew it, they all knew it. After a few hours spent in the juvenile detention, they led me to a judge with deep wrinkles on his face. I stood before him as a dangerous criminal, waiting for my punishment.

*Dear young man – the judge said, your acts reflect your thoughts, and people who cannot control their thoughts are in prison or on the way there. Now I'll give you a chance to turn it around, to change your life. Remember this, because you will not get a second chance.*

The judge stood up, picked up the gavel, hit it on a large table and said his verdict. I was let free. He hadn't lied to me. I really was given a second chance.

I could finally sleep peacefully. My secrets had been revealed. I didn't have to worry about it anymore. I didn't have to hide it anymore within myself. I felt a huge sense of relief. It literally set me free. It helped me.

Unfortunately, someone else was hurt by it. My parents were worried. I had let them down big time. I did not hear any words coming from them. I didn't have to.

I saw the shame, the pain in their eyes.

What happened, happened. I was sorry. Two days later I received a diploma for successfully completing elementary school together with a detailed report on the condition of my release set by the New York City Court. The terms: another offense would be considered as a criminal offense without the possibility for dismissal.

It took more than ten days for my parents to start talking to me. They had to, because we had a guest. It was the first time someone else had come to our old apartment. We never had a guest at home. A man came wearing a blue suit and bright red tie. Or in other words: a Manhattan lawyer wearing a blue suit and bright red tie that represented the wealthy owners of the damaged cars.

He closely reviewed our modestly furnished apartment, which looked amazing in his words, he asked us how we were doing, and then he showed us

papers from the insurance company. He explained to us that even if I damaged the cars, the insurance company would pay all the costs associated with the repairs.

A very nice message for me and my parents. The lawyer wished me a lot of luck, shook my hand and left. There was only the strong cinnamon scent of his perfume left after that. It could not have gone better. I hadn't caused any problems for my family. We could go back to how things were before.

The punishment I received was more like a reward.

I got sentenced to two months house arrest. That meant for me, I had no chance to do anything wrong or something illegal. I enjoyed my life at full speed. I got up in the afternoon, I fell asleep at night. In the meantime, I just watched TV.

I had days when I slept for sixteen hours in a row, and for eight more hours I sat down and watched TV. I had nothing else to do. I had no work. I had sandwiches in the refrigerator. I didn't need anything else to get by. My mom took care of everything else.

In my fifteen years of existence, I never even made a meal myself.

I never bought food in the store. I never cared about what and how much money it costs because we could not afford it anyway.

I did not have to ask. My parents' nightly quarrels I listened to on a regular basis were mainly because of money. They blamed the government together with Barack Obama...

They blamed their employers...

Every night, the same fights about the same topics...

Everyday I did the same thing. I spent the whole day inside the apartment like a fish in an aquarium. I didn't need to look at myself in the mirror. I experienced it, I knew that I was living a boring life. Only when I switched on the television did my life have any meaning. That little black box was one of the most amazing things in my life.

Some days I wanted to be like Michael Scofield in Prison Break. To be a smart guy with a perfectly tattooed body.

Some days I wanted to be like Brian O'Connor in Fast and Furious. Driving incredibly fast cars.

Some days I wanted to do magic tricks like Harry Potter and some days I wanted to kill people like Jason Bourne did.



In any event, I never wanted to be Tom Seed.

The movies gave me a reason to be happy, even though I faced my bullies back at school, even though our flat smelled like the black mold spreading across the walls, even though I had no friends.

Movie stars replaced everything that I did not have – friends, love, excitement...

I remember St. Patrick's Day. My parents stayed at home. Everyone had the day off. Me, my mom, my father, we sat on the old couch and watched the news on the TV. I had to partake in the TV channels that old people usually watched. From the microwave wafted the great smell of pizza, frozen pizza. One of the few foods we could afford. Bored from the long commercials, we sat down behind the table and started to chow down on our pizza. We enjoyed it, the delicious taste of the thin dough. Suddenly something interrupted our moment of joy. I heard a noise, so I went to turn off the TV. I heard a knock on the door. Someone was knocking on our door. We had no idea who it might be. Mom was sitting closer to the door, so she went to open it.

A tall man in a FedEx uniform stood outside the door.

*Mrs. Seed?* He asked.

I knew it must be something important. Very important because no couriers go to the Bronx. They're too scared. The guy looked frightened too. Mom signed something, then he went away. He brought a large brown envelope. Each of us had our own idea of what might be inside. Maybe new checks? Perhaps we won something? Maybe they invited us to the Oprah Show?

I opened the envelope with my excitement building. Papers dropped from inside the envelope. A ton of documents from an insurance company based in Manhattan. The nightmare had returned to our lives. These papers stated the value of the damage caused by my stupid actions.

We had to pay \$40,000 within thirty days. That lawyer had not lied to us. The insurance company had paid the costs of repairing the damaged cars, but we had to pay that amount to the insurance company. When I read it, I ran to the bathroom and threw up the pizza I had eaten a few minutes ago. I was so nervous. My whole body was shaking. I had a huge pulsing pain in my stomach.

While my mother was crying, my father started to hit me many times with a leather belt. After so many days of sitting in front of the TV, in peace, I couldn't stop myself. I couldn't bear the pain anymore.

I attacked my father.

I tried to stop him ...

I failed ...

My attempt did not work. Everything just got worse.

He tossed his belt and began to beat me with his hands straight on my face. I'm sure that if he had not broken my nose, which started to bleed so hard that the blood covered his whole body, he would have killed me then and there. The broken nose saved my life. After a few hard moments, my mom called an ambulance for me, and it came very quickly. They took care of me and my nose. Luckily, I did not have to go to the hospital. Of course they asked who did this to me. I told them that I slipped on the wet floor and hit my face on the table.

Yes, I was lying! But if I told them the truth, the next time a funeral car would come to our apartment, not an ambulance.

When the EMTs left, my mom asked me for the business card for that lawyer from Manhattan. She called him and tried to explain our situation, that we did not have enough money for the insurance company. It did not take long before the call ended. My mother told us with a sad voice that there was no other option, that we had to pay, otherwise we would go to court.

My parents thought it was a miracle if we would be left with some money for food at the end of the month. Less than a hundred dollars in the bank account, in our wallets just a few dollars ... This was all the money we had. We did not have any jewelry, antiques, or other valuable items that we could sell. We did not even have health insurance. The most valuable thing my family owned was that old apartment, inherited from my grandparents.

We had less than thirty days to get \$40,000. I knew my family was having a difficult time. My parents worked regular jobs: my mom cleaned at the fast-food chain, my father looked after the parking lot at a mall.

I never heard them complain about their work. Only about their employers. I think they liked their work, but there was one problem. Their jobs provided them with only the minimum wage, even though they worked full days. My parents did not have any friends, siblings, or other relatives to help us. As a poor family, we did not have any other option.

The next day, we all visited the bank. My mom explained our situation to the clerk sitting behind the desk. He assured us that the bank was helping people like us solve their problems. We needed to borrow \$40,000. The clerk asked about our income, our expenses. Everything was entered into his computer. Then he went to the office nearby. We were sitting nervously in the huge seats while we tried to distract ourselves by admiring the decorations hanging on the wall.

Five minutes later, he came back and shared the words: *As a low-income family, our bank cannot lend such a high amount. We can lend you up to \$15,000. No more.*

My mother was overwhelmed with emotions. She went to her knees and asked the clerk while crying her eyes out for an exception: *Sir, \$15,000 is a huge sum of money, but I need the whole amount, \$40,000. We need it for an insurance company in Manhattan, not for us. Please, you are our only chance.*

The clerk returned to the same office. This time he came back with some papers and told us that the bank would lend us the whole sum, \$40,000, provided we would guarantee it with our flat in the Bronx.

We agreed without hesitation. We left for home very satisfied. The bank had lent us the money, which we immediately sent to the Manhattan Insurance Company. On the same day, we had two phone calls. The first call from the Manhattan Insurance Company confirming the damage had been paid for, which meant no court for us. The second call came from that lawyer who thanked us for the serious and open discussion. Not only in words, but he also sent us a gift basket full of fruits.

My parents understood their income would not be enough to pay the monthly repayments for the loan. Solving this situation meant working harder and longer than ever before. Our flat was on the line. Everything we had.

My mother found a second job – she worked as a dog caretaker during the day, working her job at the fast food chain during the night.

My dad had to do the same thing. Throughout the day he worked as a parking guard in the shopping center, working at nights as a street sweeper.

I felt horrible. I destroyed the lives of my parents, the most important people in my life. Since I was kid, everything I did was bad. I never did anything to earn their praise me. I never did anything that would make them happy. Other children gave their parents reasons to be proud of them. I only gave my parents reasons to be disappointed in me. Everything that could go wrong, I messed up. They probably considered me to be their biggest mistake, not their greatest gift.

How could I change this situation? ...

How could I help them? ...

Questions that I did not know the answer to.

That horrible feeling to see them returning home late at night home, tired from their hard work, was self-evident.

They looked terrible.

Their faces had more wrinkles than ever before.

Their eyes were sadder than ever before.

After a month of hard work every day in two different jobs, my parents received their paychecks.

A well-deserved payout.

Unfortunately, after paying the bills for electricity, water, taxes, and loans, we were in the same situation as we were before with just one job.

Miserable.

It had been weeks since we had eaten together at the table as a real family.

I was tired of seeing the same episode Two and a Half Men for the second time, so I decided to get outside for some fresh air. For a long time, I roamed across the dangerous streets of the Bronx. A typical couch potato like myself, I was always faced with bullying. It was no different in the streets. Calling me various names, insults from guys driving their cars by with loud music blasting, these things didn't scare me. Barking dogs behind the fences did not scare me.

Those big guys with the knives in their hands frightened me. Because of them, I felt the ice cold touch of a knife blade on my own neck. For the first time in my life, I had the desire to be different. I no longer wanted to be the poor, weak boy who was the victim of the strong. On the streets, people were always attacking me. Guys, women, children, nobody respected me. I wanted to be that guy, with respect, with big muscles, with honor.

I saw an ad on the TV with a guy with big muscles. His name was Greg Plitt. I wanted to look like him. I wanted to be like him. Every day I started practicing with my own weight. Pushups, sit-ups, squats. I practiced up to the last drop of power in my body. Every repetition made me stronger. Every exercise I did made me more persistent. In a relatively short time I saw the results. I knew that if I want to have big muscles, I have to practice just like Greg Plitt does. In our neighborhood there was only one facility with computers available to the public for free. The public library.

I was hoping to find there what I needed to find. When I came in, I asked an older guy behind the counter where I could find information about a guy from TV. He recommended that I search the internet. I was embarrassed to tell him that I did not know how to use the internet.

*No worries about it, my boy,* he said.

Then he showed me the small white box with buttons called a computer. He showed me where and how to write that person's name. I sat down on the chair and typed his name – Greg Plitt, I clicked on the search button. In just a second, I found out so many exciting things about the guy.

I was overwhelmed. He served in the army before he became a fitness star. I read an interview with him where he mentioned his workout routine. I finally learned how to train. In addition to the workout routine, I also found his videos. After watching the first video,

I wanted to see more and more. I was so motivated. So, so motivated. Greg Plitt gave me the reason to keep going despite my tough life. Before I returned

home, I printed out some of his photos which I stuck to the wall of my little room. I admired them for the rest of that day.

I couldn't sleep that night. I was still thinking about exercise. I imagined myself walking along the streets of the Bronx with big muscles, all the people saying hello, respecting me. I was dreaming that all those big guys were scared to look into my eyes... I couldn't get it out of my head.

The boys with the big muscles exercise at the gym with iron, not at home in front of the TV. My inner voice was whispering: soon I had to start high school, and I had to be in good shape. Otherwise, I would be a victim of bullies again like in kindergarten and elementary school. I created such a big issue for my parents already, I couldn't burden them with anything else. I had to find a reasonable solution for how to train in a real gym with real equipment.

After a sleepless night, the idea hit me. My neighbor had muscles like Greg. I figured he had to train with iron. Without hesitation I got up from my bed and went out into the corridor directly in front of his door. There was loud music coming out of his apartment. I think I heard Eminem. I knocked on his door. I had to knock more times because of that loud music. After a moment, the door opened and my strong neighbor stood in front of me. I asked him where he trains. He kindly told me that there is a small gym in our block of flats, in the cellar, and if I was interested I could train with him there.

Of course I agreed with that idea. I couldn't believe it. A fitness center in the basement of our block of flats!

The next morning I was excitedly waiting in front of the locked door to the cellar gym. I had no idea when my neighbor Gary was going to practice, so I sat there on the stairs and waited. I sat there for a few hours until I heard a few voices. Some guys were walking down the stairs. Three guys big as NFL players: my neighbor Gary and his two buddies – Ray and Patrick. Each of them had the same haircut, short hair and muscles showing strong veins. Their bodies looked like a map with an engraved path. If I met one of them on the street, I would not have the courage to stand up to him.

When I stood in front of them on the stairs, in front of the cellar gym, I felt blessed that I was given the chance to spend time with them.

My neighbor, Gary, put his massive arm on my shoulder, looked straight into my eyes and said: *Three years ago I sold drugs on the streets. I was the best dealer. I had a lot of money, more than I needed. Instead of spending, I saved everything. One night I was caught by the cops, and they arrested me. I spent two*

*years in prison. There I found my passion. Passion in exercise. After I was released, I bought the equipment from my savings and opened up this gym. In the past, I used to give people crap on the street that destroyed their lives and the lives of their families. Now I give the same people a place where they can develop, work on themselves.*

At that moment, I realized I had been wrong. Not all people in the Bronx are evil.

After entering the gym, I entered paradise. My dreams had come true. Machines, dumbbells, weights, kettlebells, boxing bags. The walls were covered with posters of Arnold Schwarzenegger, Ronnie Coleman, Muhammad Ali, The Rock. A real Paradise. My eyes were shining like the eyes of a small child in Disneyland.

Gary asked me why I decided to train. I told him the truth. The cruel truth about how the other guys were bullying me, how I was held up with a knife, how Greg Plitt motivated me.

*You cannot run away from fear all the time, you have to stand up to it, overcome it,* he assured me.

I did not have any experience with exercising in the gym on the machines or with dumbbells, so I needed a bit of help. Ray willingly showed me the correct technique for many exercises, while Patrick was training on the bench press and Gary was observing him. My muscles were on fire. They literally burned. It hurt, but I loved the pain. This pain was different. It made me stronger. After an hour of heavy exercise I stood in front of the mirror, closed my eyes and imagined how I would look with a perfect body. The idea was motivational for me, making me happy.

That place made me happy. These guys made me happy. Even though I looked like a skeleton, I did not worry me. That was the reason why I came there. To change it.

By the way, I heard something from those guys that I hadn't heard from anyone before. Words of praise, encouragement, thanks and support. When I came home, I opened the refrigerator and picked out two sandwiches, which I immediately ate. Usually I turned on the TV at that time to watch the Simpsons, Breaking Bad, or NCIS:Los Angeles, but this exercise made me so tired that I laid in bed and immediately fell asleep. No need or mood to watch those yellow Simpsons or some crime series.



The gym had become my second home. I spent more time there than at home. There I learned to be responsible, disciplined, patient. I did things I was never allowed to do at home.

Painted the walls.

Vacuumed the carpets.

Cleaned the toilets.

All members paid a monthly membership fee, except for me. I was not only the gym member. I was the one in charge of that gym.

I considered Gary to be more than just my boss. I started to see him as my best friend.

Since my very first day at high school, I was a troublemaker. I faced many issues. Different issues than the ones I encountered in elementary school or primary school. I had to be at two different places at the same moment. In school and in the gym. During lessons, I listened to boring lectures from boring teachers, and during breaks I ran over to the gym to unlock and lock the door again for fans of big muscles. This experience taught me the feeling of having to care for so many things at the same time, just like my parents did. Surprisingly it worked. My teachers did not complain. Neither did my gym mates. Nobody complained. It was only my issue. I flew from one place to the other like a bird. I did not enjoy it at all. To be quite honest, I hated it.

As expected, my muscles gave me the respect that I believed I deserved. Also, changing my hairstyle helped me too. I no longer wore my hair longer like I did before. Every day, I shaved my head with my father's razor in our bathroom. I looked like a tough guy, not a momma's boy. In class, I became one of the most respected people. The other guys showed me respect. They said hi to me, shook my hands, asked me how I was doing. Completely different behavior than in the past.

Time at school passed incredibly slowly. I had to learn things that I had no interest in knowing. I had to sit cluelessly and wait for the deafening ringing of the bell, which always caused a traffic jam at the school exit. At school I only enjoyed the breaks. Long breaks. Only then I could leave the torturous classrooms for my beloved gym. I did not see any sense in being a student. My teachers still talked and talked in the hopes that someone was listening to them, but no one listened to them. Nobody!

Once I told my teacher that the television taught me more than he taught me. He did not argue with me.

After six months of attending high school, I decided to quit. No one could stop me. My mom and my father worked for days at their jobs. Home for them was just a couple of hours in bed. They had no chance to find out. And even if they find out, I wouldn't care.

I preferred the gym to the school.

A place where I could spend the whole day with a smile on my face.

A place that gave me more than school ever gave me.

A place that completed me.

A place I got real friends.

A place I got real results. Visible results.

I had a better relationship with those guys than I had with my own parents. They supported me, and I supported them. They took care of me, and I took care of them. They were my real family. I could walk down the streets because the enemies of my past had become the brothers of my present. Everyone in the Bronx knew who Tom Seed was. Everyone knew me.

This never would have happened if I had not started practicing at Gary's basement gym.

Exercise gave me a self-confidence that I never had. Exercise gave me self-esteem that I never had. Exercise gave me the respect that I never had. Exercise gave me the friends I never had.

It all started with one knife under my neck. It all began with one fitness star on a TV advertisement.

I had so much to do that I completely forgave my parents for our family issues. To be honest, I also forgot about my parents. My mom, my dad. I didn't miss them at all.

I didn't hear from them all day. I never even saw them during the day. You know, I felt deep in my heart that I loved them. They gave me a place to live. They gave me food. Solved all my problems!

Without them, I could not have solved anything. I'm grateful for that.

But they gave me only the basic things necessary for survival...

They satisfied my external needs while my heart was injured. No feelings of love. No feelings of importance. No feelings of home. Even though I did a lot of bad things, I deserved the love of my parents.

One October morning I got up early, as usual. With Gary, I agreed to wash the gym from floor to ceiling. As usual, I put on my heavy black tracksuit with the same white t-shirt I wore every day. I was about to brush my teeth when I heard something strange. Strange sounds coming out of my parents' room. I have to confess, I was a little scared. I did not know what it might be. I was wearing a t-shirt with a v-neck, so I was hoping that if the thief saw my big muscles, he would get scared and run away. I took a few uncertain steps, and then I opened the door to my parents' bedroom.

I didn't find any thief there. I didn't find any animals. My mother lay in bed, so small and tiny. My mom who I hadn't seen for months. I asked her what was happening. She looked like a mummy, completely white. Without

energy, she told me she did not feel well, she was probably sick. I touched her forehead, it was burning hot.

She was sweaty all over. The high temperature had immediately overtaken her. I didn't know what to do, so I just stood there hopelessly, staring at her as she suffered.

All of the sudden, I remembered what to do in such a situation. I saw it in the movies. I took a cloth from the kitchen, soaked it in cold water and laid it on her hot face. It helped her. Besides, I brought her a glass of water and I told her to get some more sleep.

I couldn't stay any longer with her. I had to go. In the gym I was sweeping all the carpets, washing the floors, cleaning the mirrors and toilets. Finally, I disinfected the dumbbells and machines.

I had finished cleaning, and the gym was bright and shiny. Back in the apartment I checked up my sick mother. In such a short time, her health had gotten much worse. A cough, high fever. I did not need to be Doctor House to find out what disease she had. She had the flu. The common flu, she only needed to lie in the warm bed to get rid of it. I made her some warm tea from sliced onion. I couldn't do anything more for her. After a busy morning, I was finally able to pay attention just to myself and my friends. Of course in the gym.

Gary brought a new edition of the magazine Muscle & Fitness, the Bible for every fitness lover. At school, I had to read books, learn about the past, do my homework. I hated it. But to read these fitness magazines, I had a completely different relationship with reading. I loved it. I read articles about bodybuilders, their advice, their regular workouts, their eating habits and their enthusiasm.

On that day, I returned home late in the evening. Of course, I wasn't in a good mood. My mom had created this bad mood for. I didn't feel comfortable. I always had the whole apartment just to myself, I only lived there by myself. Since my mother's illness, she spent her time at home, not at work as usual. I was used to be home alone without my parents. My daily ritual was disrupted. I just hoped that my mom would recover as soon as possible so that she would be able to get back to work again. She'll be at work, I'll be alone at home. In peace and quiet.

The phone rang the next morning. I picked it up. Mom's boss from the fast food joint called. He asked me in a very angry voice where my mother was, screaming at the top of his lungs why she wasn't coming to work. I told him

that my mother was sick and that she would not return for the next few days. Without saying anything, he ended the call. I assumed it was not important, so I didn't tell my mother about it.

Twenty minutes later, the phone rang again.

The same guy in his croaking voice told me the following: *I'm sorry, boy, your mother is no longer working for me ...* I was speechless. How could he do something like that? My mom had been working there every day for years, and he sacked her just because she was lying at home in bed sick with a high fever. I couldn't keep this "pleasant" message to myself.

I just went to my mom and sadly told her about the phone call from her boss. Her former boss.

She accepted it with grace. She just told me: *alright, Tom.*

Nothing else. She did not complain, she did not scream, she did not cry. I expected a completely different attitude. Due to her health condition, she did not have the strength to walk or for work. Standing on her feet was an issue for her. The common flu, normally cured in a few days, had plagued my mom for more than a month. Just skin and bones, she was lying in bed all day. On her body, red spots appeared due to her long-term condition. An irritating dry cough prevented her from sleeping. Still coughing, all day and all night, and it was still getting worse. I'm afraid that even the black mold on the walls of our apartment hurt her more. As a poor family we could not afford medicine or a doctor. We did not have health insurance. For others, of course this was a normal thing, but for us it was only a dream.

I spent most of my time at home. I did not have time to practice. I did not have time for anything. While my father worked, I was taking care of my sick mother. I was very bothered to see my mother in such a condition. I wanted to help her, but I could not. Our family again faced a difficult time. Again and again.

We received a kind reminder from the bank that we hadn't paid the loan. Then we received another reminder from the power plant. We hadn't paid the electricity bills. The financial situation in our family looked critical. It had never been this bad. Even though my father had two different jobs, we did not have enough money. We kept receiving new and new bills – for electricity, water, television. Dad's salary paid only a fraction of these bills. We had no money left over. My father had to borrow some money for food from his colleagues at work. Otherwise, we would be starving. After these events, my

mom became a shell of her former self. She hurt herself dramatically, she did not talk to us, she did not eat anything. She closed herself. Also, dad's relationship with us changed. He blamed me and my mother for the situation we were in.

He was right. I did it. I've done everything wrong. I was responsible for this.

Unpaid bills brought fear, extra burdens, and tension to our lives, but the red envelope that came brought disaster to our family.

When we took a loan from the bank, we guaranteed our only property – the flat we lived in. At that time, we had no idea what this would mean to us. We were given two days to leave the apartment. Then the bank would take it. We immediately called the bank. We visited the bank in person. We asked a lawyer from Manhattan for help. No positive results. They had no interest in helping us. They only cared about our apartment. Nothing else. I felt so helpless. I could not sleep. I could not calm myself down. I was still thinking about what would happen to me, my family if ...

For certain reasons, we did not tell my mother about this situation, because if she knew, it would have disastrous consequences for her. On the first day, we stayed in our apartment with the hope that they maybe they would consider leaving us there. We were wrong.

The next morning, a guy came very early in a gray suit with two cops. The cops urged us to leave the apartment without any grief. I tried hard to explain to them what would happen to us when we lost the apartment. We did not have any other option. Either we leave the apartment voluntarily, or we will be kicked out with our hands tied.

I took just three sandwiches out of the refrigerator into my bag. Nothing else. With tears in my eyes I entered my parents' room and explained to my mother why the cops were in the apartment. I do not think she heard me at all. I lifted her out of bed and put her in my arms. Away from our apartment. I wanted to fight them, to stand up to them, to protect our apartment. But if I did it, I would go to jail, and my mom and my dad would be all alone. I was only sixteen years old.

Cold November weather. Frost and snow. An excellent time of year – for people in their warm homes, and a devastating time for homeless people. We did not have any place to warm up. We did not have anywhere to sleep. We did not have any place to go. The old apartment, inherited from my grandparents, was confiscated by the bank. Besides that, we did not have anything. I wanted to go downstairs to Gary's gym in the basement to ask him for help. Gary would help us, but without a blink of an eye, we had to leave not only the apartment but also the whole building.

With my sick mother in my arms I walked through the cold streets of the Bronx. Even though she weighed less than eighty pounds, my legs were weak all the way.

The hardest steps of my life.

Unbearable pain in my muscles, in my bones. It tortured me.

We went to my dad's work two miles away. Completely frozen, we came to the shopping mall.

My father sat there in a small booth from which he guarded the parking lot. When he saw us, he knew what had happened. The expression on his face revealed it.

He told us he was going to go to the dressing room. He came back ten minutes to pick us up. We were supposed to wait for him, so we were waiting for him as he told us. Even though it was snowing and our clothes and our shoes were completely soaked, we stayed there until it got dark.

Then I realized that my father would not come back to us again.

He left us. He just left us forever.

He let us out in the winter like animals.

If we stayed out there, we would not have survived until morning. We had to find a warm place to stay. To warm up, to dry. With my last amounts of energy I walked through the dark streets looking for a place to stay. Any place to sleep in. The motel was not an option. Already out of the money we had with us, we could not even buy a decent meal. We found a place to stay only in our Bronx. An old abandoned garage provided us shelter from the wet snow. We went to a corner where we tried to survive that night. We could not sleep. It was so cold. Our bodies were shaking like crazy. We were literally frozen alive.

That's the day I lost my home, my father, my friends.

After a few hours of struggling with the cold, I fell asleep. I did not know how I did it, but when I woke up, I felt like someone was killing me alive. My entire body was really in pain. All my fingers were burning. I had survived that night. Fortunately, my sick mother also survived. But the fever remained. It was so cold and she was burning. The day before, I lost a lot of things except one. I knew if we stayed in the Bronx, some of my friends would soon see me homeless. I could not do that. I would lose my pride. The only thing left for me.

I did not mean to be ashamed. With just five dollars in the wallet, we headed to Manhattan. We had to stop very often, to rest and let me catch my breath. After a challenging journey, we arrived in Manhattan. The place where all our problems started. I believed that the local rich people would help us. They would feel regret after seeing us.

I knocked on all the doors in that neighborhood. Not one opened. Disappointed from the lack of interested, we sat on an empty street next to some large black containers that formed a barrier for us with the outside world. In one container I found an old brown torn blanket that I used to cover my mom with. Besides the blanket, I found nothing useful.

The condition of my ill mom had deteriorated rapidly. She needed help. I left her alone on the street, hidden behind the containers, while I went to the streets. To beg.

I felt uncomfortable, embarrassed, humiliated. While I was asking people, unknown people for money, my conscience did not allow me to look into their eyes. I lost my pride, but I had no choice. Some people took a picture of me.



Some people laughed at me and some people threatened me. I imagined myself jumping from a skyscraper and my suffering would be over.

The only reason I did not do it was my mom, she needed me. She gave me the only reason not to end it all. Stopping and reaching out to people passing by did not work. So I sat down on the edge of the sidewalk in the hope that I could beg for at least a few bucks. At the end of the day I was so done with it all. It was not worth it. I got less than two dollars for one day. It was hardly enough to buy a grilled onion cheddar burger at McDonald's.

The days on the street were hard and the nights even harder. We suffered from the cold. Hunger and thirst forcing me to get up and beg again. The people who gave me a few dollars for the previous day in sorrow disappeared. I only faced insults, abuse, humiliation. Their hard words hurt me. I sat at the edge of the sidewalk like a total loser. Even the dogs did not stop for me.

A group of young guys noticed this and took advantage of it. They provoked me. They were throwing cigarettes at me. They spit on me. They even recorded it. They laughed at me while I was raving. They treated me like a total waste! No respect, no respect at all.

I stood up, grabbed one of those guys by his sweatshirt and hit him with my right hand right in his face. They got scared. They ran away from me. To be sure, I did the same.

I had only passed a few streets when I found myself in front of the same group of young guys. This time, their group had many more members than before. Almost all of them dressed in oversized clothes. They looked like rappers from elementary school.

They did not want to talk to me about my life or about my hobbies. They wanted to fight with me. To get some revenge.

I had no chance of fighting them. I stood there alone. I started running away from them like a little boy before a storm. I ran until I found some safety.

I had lost my self-confidence that I had gained from exercising so hard in the gym.

I had lost my courage, gained in the gym.

I had lost my strength, gained in the gym.

I had lost my respect, gained in the gym.

I hated myself.

The longer I lived on the street, the more I felt anger towards my surroundings, I hated the things around me. Guys at my age were going to school in new cars, dates with blue-eyed blondes, playing basketball. And me?

I lived on the streets with my sick mother, like two useless pieces of trash.

My mother started coughing up blood. There was nothing else left, just to take her to the doctor. I went to the office without even knocking on the door, and I showed my mom to the doctor. I asked him for help. He did not feel comfortable telling me that my mom had a huge problem with her lungs. Immediately she had to be taken to the hospital. He warned me that treating

this disease without health insurance costs nine hundred dollars. I explained to him that we had no money for food, and especially not for such an expensive treatment. He excused himself and had us let out of his office by a security guard.

How can you be so selfish? How can you be so cruel? No interest in helping my mom! I cried...

Despair, hopelessness, disappointment, hatred. All these feelings were at the forefront of my mind. In this world, people only cared about money, nothing else. We did not matter to them, us poor people. People walking down the street looked at me as I held my mother in my arms with misunderstanding, I saw it in their eyes. Trying to avoid us instead of trying to help us.

For more than three weeks we had been sleeping on the streets as real homeless people. For a few days, we hadn't eaten food like human beings. All the shelters were full. All the warm, dry places that had access for people like us, forbidden. The hunger and cold were unbearable. My clothes looked like the clothes of a scarecrow.

My muscles had disappeared.

I looked like a skeleton, just skin and bone.

Near our “camp,” they opened up a small grocery store. Only one older worker was there. I took the opportunity to feed us. With a hood on my head, I hid bread, hot dogs, and dried meat under my sweatshirt, and without being noticed I left the shop. The worker didn’t have the time to notice it. He was too busy. I knew that theft is a crime, but I did it for survival. Not for pleasure. After a long time, we finally had enough food for the next few days.

Back when we were home in our apartment, I used to eat my food so quickly. I took it as a sure thing of course. But I ate it very slowly on the street, enjoying every bite. I didn’t leave one crumb to the rats hanging around us.

Food helped me to calm down my hunger, but not for my mom. She needed something more important – medication. People living on the streets die from winter and sickness. I could not allow my mom to die the same way. For the first time in my life, I stole food from the store and I succeeded. I thought I could do it a second time. With medicine.

Near us, I found three pharmacies. In the first pharmacy, many people were shopping all the time, it would be too risky. So I just asked what medicine is best for the lungs. The pharmacist recommended a Swiss medicine costing thirty-eight dollars to me.

In the second pharmacy, I couldn’t do anything. They had already closed.

My last and only chance was the third pharmacy on Canal Street. Through the window, I saw that there was no one except a saleswoman. I entered the shop, greeting her politely. Confidently I asked for the Swiss medicine for thirty-eight dollars, which the first pharmacy had recommended. She put it on the counter and asked if I could afford to buy it.

Of course, no problem, I told her.

She packed it into my bag, handed it to me and asked for \$38. I pretended to pull the money out of my back pocket of my jeans. Then I ran away. With the medicine in the bag. Of course without paying.

I was so excited and so scared.

I said to myself: yes, yes, I did it.

My mother will finally be healthy like she used to be.

I was running through busy streets crowded with people, among whom I looked like a loser, while inside of me I felt like a winner.

In a short time I had stolen from two different shops without being noticed. Nobody caught me. No one punished me. I thought I was untouchable.

To celebrate my victory, I stopped at a big shopping mall. For a moment I preferred my pleasure and not my mother's health. I knew that nothing would happen to her when I came back with the medicine later. I was caring for her all the time, right?

I just wanted to have time for myself.

The mall looked huge. Glass windows, dozens of shops, Christmas decorations, happy people with full shopping bags, restaurants with mouthwatering food. Such an amazing sight. I went to the store that attracted me the most. The bakery. Every piece of their cakes looked like artwork. Red. White. Blue. So many different varieties. I could not resist them.

I took three chocolate desserts and I quickly ran away from there. Again no one caught me. In a good mood, I sat down on a bench close to the escalator where I enjoyed the delicious taste of chocolate. I tell you, it was the most delicious sweet taste I ever ate.

The moment I decided stand up and get back to my mom, somebody grabbed my hand. I looked up, frightened.

I was looking straight into the eyes of a guy in uniform. A guy from security. He took me into a small, dirty room with flat screens on the walls. There he showed me the video footage from the camera, as I was stealing those desserts.

Obviously, I was not untouchable.

I was stupid.

The security guy looked through my sweatshirt and found nothing in it. Then he searched my medicine bag. It seemed suspicious that I was missing a receipt. He saw the name of the pharmacy on the bag, so he called to check it out. He probably called the young saleswoman who told him I had stolen the drugs, because he called the police as his second call. When he called, he locked the door and left me there alone only with my fear. He came back to me with two cops. He showed them the same video as he did to me.

Without any unnecessary questions, they took me to the police station. I knew what was waiting for me.

I had broken the conditions set by the court. My hands were shaking, my head was shaking. I felt horrible.

In less than two hours, they accused me of two thefts and I was to be immediately sent to the juvenile correction center.

I had reconciled myself with the punishment set by the court, but I could not live with the fact that I was leaving my mom alone out there. I went to the judge asking for help for my mother, which she needed. He allowed me to go see her. Thanks to the judge, I could help my mother before I began serving a sentence of one year in the correctional facility.

With my hands tied, I got into the white van, among the other young criminals.

Even though we lived different lives, even though we came from different families, even though we grew up in different environments, even though we had a different skin color, we all had one thing in common: we had broken the law.

The police officer in charge of the truck stopped close to the street I knew all too well. He opened the door and escorted me to my mother. From a distance, I saw her lying on the ground beside the container. I tried to wake her up. I screamed at her. I shook her. She did not respond. She was lying there unconscious. The police officer pushed me off and began to revive her.

In the meantime, he called through the ambulance's radio. Then he took me back to the van. I sat there afraid for my mother's life.

While the doctors did everything to save her life, I had done nothing. Nothing!

Our van was about to leave, and I had to get used to the feeling that I would not see my mom for the next twelve months. During a long journey by van, I looked out through the frozen window to the outside world. The world I was leaving. After arriving at the correction center, we were all sorted into one line. We stood there in the hopes that this was all just a bad dream. But it was not a dream. It was reality. A harsh reality. We had to get undressed, take a shower and get dressed in new clothes. I received a small cozy room with just a bed and toilet. The security doors closed, then the lights went out.

There was a silence in the whole facility, while my mind was in such chaos. I could not sleep. I was only thinking about my mom.

Was she alive?

Had she died?

What if she needed me?

What if she's looking for me?

I felt this incredibly horrible feeling all over my body.

I felt terrible for the first few weeks in that facility.

Very bad.

I could not sleep.

I could not eat.

I could not concentrate.

I wasted all my time lost in my own thoughts, feeling guilty.

My own thoughts were killing me alive.

My body was locked in that small room, but my mind was somewhere else.

In other words, nowhere.

Just when I was about to collapse, a ray of hope came into my life. The director of the facility invited me to his dark, wood-covered office. I expected some good news about my mother. Instead, he told me with regret that my mother had died.

I did not say a word. I did not let out any tears. I just sat there in the chair and looked out into empty space.

Only during the night was I able to give into my feelings and emotions. I cried.

I cried because I realized what I had done. I killed my mom. Because of me, my parents took out the loan. Because of me, my parents lost our home. Because of me, my father left us. Because of me, we slept in the street. Because of me, my mom died. I felt a terrible hatred of myself.

My mother stood by me when I opened my eyes for the first time. I did not stand by her when she closed her eyes the last time.

I did not want to live any longer. I did not want to breathe anymore. Staying in this correction facility was not my punishment. My punishment was to live with the guilt of what my actions had done to my family, to the people around me and to me.

From that day, I fell into depression. A deep depression.

I spent most of my time thinking about death.

Only one thought made me happy. I imagined at least a thousand times that people, crying people, were standing above my coffin, remembering me as a good person with his heart in the right place. A character with tremendous and praise worthy actions. I was not afraid of death. I was afraid of my future. I was scared of what was out there waiting for me.

The new director at the facility came up with some new rules. One of those rules affected me a lot. I had to work. In my case, this meant washing the floor for the whole facility. I was given basic instructions on how to wash and where I had to put the dirty water. After a short training, I picked up a metal bucket and mop and went to work.

Every sound I heard scared me.

Every guy I met scared me.

Everything scared me then.

I had no self-confidence. I washed the first floor relatively quickly. On the second floor, my strength came back. There was an unbearable pain in my



back. Every movement made me mad. I had blood streaks on my palms, tears in my eyes. I could not continue washing.

I sat down on the floor and breathed heavily.

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. It did not take long before someone noticed I had stopped washing. I showed them my bloody palms, but they did not care at all. They insisted that my task to be done. With extreme effort I stood up on my own feet, dipped the mop into the water and continued what I had to do. Wash the floors.

I concentrated more on my pain than on the cleanliness of the floor. I concentrated more often on my pain than what I was actually doing. That was the only way for job to get done. When I got into the room with the other convicts, all of them looked at me with unpleasant expressions. I clenched my teeth and washed the faster than I ever knew, even through the cruel pain, just to avoid having to face “those kind” people.

Tired, bloody tired as a packhorse, I finally finished all the floors. A common, household mop forced me to reach to the limits of my own strength.

I first thought that washing the floors was a stupid activity. I did it just because I had to do it.

But later I began to think it was the best thing that happened to me in that facility. Thanks to this job, I was so busy that I did not have time to think of death, which helped me overcome my depression.

My appetite returned.

My desire to live returned.

Hard work fulfilled me. I was getting into shape.

I felt like I was back in Gary’s basement gym.

Of course, it had its dark side too.

The third floor.

The place I came back from with blue bruises on my body. The criminals from that floor waited for me to first finish the job before they started with me.

They beat me without any sorrow.

This situation was repeated every day.

First and second floor paradise, third floor hell.

**T**welve months later.

After those very difficult twelve months, they released me.

I had come there with something, but I left with nothing. Only one person talked to me. The director of the facility. He shook my hand, wished me happiness in my life, and we all went our own way. He into his office, me into my white van.

As a minor, without my parents I had to live in a local shelter for people in need.

I had no big expectations. When I arrived there, in the old and dirty part of New York, an old blue-haired woman was waiting for me. She was dressed in a black dress. She welcomed me with a fake smile. Then she took me inside. She showed me the rooms of a modest shelter. One small kitchen with a round wooden table, a bathroom, a room with tools and bedrooms with beds. I got a room with another six people. From that lady I realized that all the people living there don't pay anything for accommodation. They work it out.

I barely had the chance to lie down on my new bed before that blue-haired grandmother called me into the corridor. From there she brought me into the bright room with the tools. To their workshop. Hinges, hammers and other tools hung on the walls. Everything you could have ever imagined. I had never seen many of them before. I did not know what their purpose was. Then she showed me what to do and how to do it. Take one piece, apply the glue, take the second part and join them together. Take one piece, use the glue, take the second part and join them together.

Over and over again.

I had to make stupid brooms ...

The old wounds had not healed yet, and more were added. Apparently, the old lady was not very happy with my work, as I did not hear anything besides her criticism. She could always find something she did not like. When she criticized me or insulted me, I just kept held tongue. I did not fight back. I did not change her mind. I did not dare to do it. I have always tried to do what others asked me to do, like a broom that everybody uses to clean the floors with.

I do not know how many brooms I made, I suppose it had to be hundreds. With my sticky fingers, I turned off the light in the workshop and left for the

kitchen. There I got soap that could get rid of the dried glue on my aching fingers. On the table, I had a piece of bread with strawberry jam. I knew very well what to do with it. I literally wolfed it down. After the exhausting journey from the correction facility, I was able to eat something.

My stomach made strange sounds, like horror movie. Apparently, the piece of bread surprised me.

Not a day in a new environment, and the old lady was the only person I saw there. I'm out of prison. I felt relieved inside. After an exhausting amount of hard work, I lay in bed between the cockroaches that could not prevent me from falling right asleep. But I didn't sleep for long.

A nightmare woke me up. I dreamt that my mom had died in my arms. I literally leapt out of bed. I looked around. I did not see anyone there. I was lying there alone. I approached the window in the rusty frame, through which I observed the world around me.

Lights on buildings. Stars in the sky. Cars on the road. Pedestrians on the sidewalk.

Behind this window was the real world. Behind this window were all great things. I spoke to myself...

I stood there until the first rays of sunlight struck my sad face. As it used to be my habit, I made the bed like I used to do in prison, then I moved to the kitchen. Three elderly men sat behind the table. They looked like members of a gang. Colorful dragons and snakes decorated their arms. I just hoped they were nice, friendly human beings. With a weird feeling in my stomach I sat down between them at the table. For as long as I was eating the bread, they watched me. They were focused on me. They kept looking at me. I'm sure my chewing was heard by all of them. After a careful analysis of my face, and my eyes, one of them asked if I had some cigarettes. I explained politely that I was a non-smoker. Fortunately, he accepted it positively.

When they left, I felt relieved. I felt much more at ease. The old lady, who began to test my patience, soon came to the room.

*How could you sit on your lazy ass and do nothing. This is not a hotel young man. If you want to live here, you have to earn it.* She screamed at me.

The vein on her forehead was as visible as the golden tooth of Harry Lime in Home Alone. I was not in the mood to listen to her speech about work ethic. I got to work. At least the brooms had no mouth. They did not complain.

During my work, I forgot my negative thoughts. My mind opened up. I began to think about myself, about my life, about my future.

Why should I do this hard work for free if I can do the same thing out there for real money. My parents were able to work two different jobs. Why couldn't I do that too. I was seventeen years old, and someone was still commanding me what to do. I began to think: I found myself in this shelter only because I had no relatives. I have no one to take care of me. But that does not mean I have to stay here.

I decided to find a real job outside the shelter and pay for cheap accommodation somewhere in the city. They could not hold me there against my will.

My plan was confirmed by the arrival of the five guys to my room. My roommates. I was honored to know their dark side. They arrived late at night with a great amount of noise. They had fun all night, listened to loud music, and smoked. They smoked marijuana. I knew the smell. The same smell used to spread through the streets of the Bronx. Above all, I pretended to be deeply asleep, but I was angry in my mind. I could not sleep. Their primitive talk prevented me from doing so. I did not recognize them personally, but nevertheless I knew that friendship would never be a thing for us.

I was so tired from the previous night that I exploded. I told the old lady that I am not her slave and to find someone else she can control. I recommended she look for somebody in the Central Park Zoo. From the table I took my breakfast and disappeared from that place. Out of that hole. Like a ghost. Forever.

No bars.

No locks.

No protection.

No weapons.

Nothing could stop me.

Nothing could have prevented me from leaving.

I walked through the streets with one purpose only. To find a paid job.

Again, I had no big expectations. I would take any job. I visited every shop, every restaurant, every business I saw. I was talking to owners, vendors, secretaries. Some listened to me, some ignored me. In any case, I fought. I did not give up. I continued my search.

After so many refusals, I finally succeeded. I had done it.

In an old Italian restaurant on Bedford Street they were looking for help in the kitchen. They asked for my previous experience. I confidently told them that I recently worked as a dishwasher in one facility and also as a manual worker in a local carpenter's workshop.

I didn't tell them the truth, but I wasn't lying. I just didn't tell the whole story.

I signed some papers, stripped off my gray sweatshirt and the real job could finally start.

All day I washed dirty plates. So many plates. Even though it was really boring work, my excitement did not go away. I still had a smile on my face. I felt fantastic.

During my break, my boss asked me where I was living. I told him embarrassingly that I was currently looking for a place to stay. He willingly offered me a small room above his restaurant. I accepted his offer. And just like that, my housing issues were simply resolved. We agreed that the cost for the accommodation will be deducted from my salary.

In my seventeen years of age, I had found my first job. A perfect job. I had secure accommodation and food.

I put all my energy into the job. Because I knew that the more hours I work, the more I'll earn.

I worked every day, from early morning to late at night.

Seven days a week.

I bought some new clothes with my first paycheck.

Pants, t-shirts, sweatshirts, shoes...

Finally, I could walk outdoors among the people without feeling any shame, thanks to my new outfits from famous brands. Among the people, I started to feel self-confident. My status had increased. My self-esteem had increased. I think that for the first time in my life, I felt more like someone else. I was no longer outside the crowd because of my poor looks. Since I started wearing nicer clothes, people on the street just saw me as normal.

My efforts at work were regularly rewarded. Not just with money, but also with trust. I was part of something. In the kitchen, I was one of the smartest and hardest-working guys. I always got the tasks that required more responsibility. From a simple dirty dishwasher in the kitchen, I started working as a chef's assistant. I started learning more about my colleagues. I learned new skills like cooking, baking.

At that place, I really felt loved.

Everything I did, I did it the best way I knew. And it worked. I did not need a day off or a two-week vacation. I enjoyed my work. It brought some sense of regularity to my life. It did not take long before my boss gave me even more responsibilities than before. From the mysterious kitchen straight to the battlefield, out among the guests.

I had a new task: to serve guests. I became a waiter. I was a little afraid at first. I thought I wasn't good enough for that position. My voice was shaking, I stammered, I was sweating.

Then I found out that I had no reason to be afraid. The guests behaved very kindly to me. And often they left a tip for me.

I remember one week when we were very busy at the restaurant. All my colleagues were watching the New York Giants game. In my opinion, they were wasting their time as the Giants always lost. The next day, we celebrated the birth of Timothy's daughter, our boss, who held a big celebration at his Long Island home.

While they were having fun I was working hard in the restaurant. Without any breaks. I preferred responsibility over entertainment. I was in charge of everything. Cooking, dishwashing, washing the toilets and floors. And, of course, the most important thing, the service for our guests. Demanding guests and modest guests. Nice guests and arrogant guests. Fancy guests and modestly dressed guests. Neither of them noticed any missing staff, or a change in the taste of our food. No one!

The whole restaurant was run by only one person: me. I did it perfectly. And I enjoyed it up to the last moment. My feelings about myself grew tremendously. Pride flowed through my veins. Those days I went to sleep with an incredible feeling of a job well done.

It was two days later when the rest of the team joined me and everything went back to normal. I did mind it a bit. Actually, I minded it a lot. Attention was no longer paid only to me. I was not the only one who received recognition from the guests, from the boss. There were other guys who shared the important little things with me. The times when it was just me under the spotlight were over. I just relied on the fact that Timothy, my boss, wouldn't forget who had helped his restaurant when it mattered the most.

During our lunch break, I sat down with one of the chefs behind a table where we ate fresh pineapple pizza.

I didn't even have a chance to touch it because Timothy called me to his office. I had ever seen a bigger mess, not even in the kitchen. All sorts of staples, notes, shredded papers, newspaper photos, empty boxes of food. I sat there on a chair covered with cobwebs, and in my head, I imagined how I would takeover the management of Timothy's restaurant. How I would manage it to win prizes from the Mayor's Office for the Best Restaurant of the Year. I had worked there in so many different job positions. Except for one.

My exciting ideas were interrupted by Timothy's shouts. *I trusted you! You were like my son. I wanted to make you the boss of my restaurant, but you messed it all up. You're such a disappointment!*

I had no idea what he was talking about. Did I do something wrong? I had no idea. So I asked him for an explanation.

*During the weekend, when you working here, you served a group of people. Very wealthy people from Manhattan. You probably could recognize them. They wore white custom tailor-made suits. On that day, you did everything perfectly, but a few years ago you did something terrible. Something unacceptable. You*

*destroyed some cars. People's property. And by the way, those rich men in the white suits, they used to own those cars. They knew you, Tom. They didn't forget about it. And you lied to me. I do not want to have anything to do with people like you.*

He told me that. Then he placed my paycheck on the table and told me to leave his restaurant.

I felt a strong blow right to my heart. I didn't understand how he could do this to me. How could he throw me out after all this? I looked into his eyes with disappointment. I went to the kitchen where I hugged the chef. That's how shocked I was –I started crying in his embrace. He knew what had happened. Everyone around me knew what had happened. They tried to comfort me, to calm me down. Unnecessarily. The more they tried to help me, the worse I felt.

I had worked so hard there.

I had felt so good there.

I had gotten so much recognition there.

I had enjoyed so many fun memories there.

And I lost it all because of such foolishness from such a long time ago...

Jobless and homeless. I left that place with only a gym bag full of clothing. I had only eighty dollars in my wallet. I didn't save any money from my previous paydays. I spent them on the clothes I had in that bag. If I had not received my pay that day, I would have had nothing. I could not stay without income for long. I would not have survived it. I could not do it myself. Sadness, disappointment, all that was replaced by anger. I had a desire, a strong desire to prove to Timothy that he had made the biggest mistake of his life. The best way I could get my revenge was to work for his competition. For another Italian restaurant. And I didn't need any GPS navigation to get there. I had no need for any map. I knew exactly where to go.

There were two similar Italian restaurants in the neighborhood, the owners of whom I personally met.

I went to the first restaurant and before I tried to say something, they shooed me out of the restaurant. I obviously had more experience than they required. But it didn't bother me. On the contrary, it only strengthened my desire to prove Timothy wrong.



I had to walk faster to the second restaurant. I wanted to make it before dark. I did not want to find myself on the dark streets surrounded by criminals. Fortunately, I made while the sun was out. From the outside it looked normal, no different than the other restaurants. But it looked completely different on the inside. Luxury. Marble on the walls, brown leather seats, a waterfall, nicely dressed staff. I approached a waiter around my age who sent me to the kitchen to find one of the chefs. I tried to impress him. I praised the restaurant, his food, his knives. I praised him a lot. But I probably didn't try hard enough.

The situation was the same. I had to leave the restaurant. Before I left, he told me the reason for his disinterest. Why he was not interested in hiring me even though he had a job wanted poston the door. I had met their demands. I had the experience. I had references. The problem was coming from somewhere else.

Timothy was the problem. He had called all the restaurant owners in that neighborhood and told them what I had done a few years ago. How I damaged a couple of cars in Manhattan. Which is why I belonged among the renegades. What was there for me to even think about.

I did not expect anyone to have anything to do with me anymore. From being one of my friends, he had become my enemy.

I made the mistake of trusting him.

I still had not accepted it. So I kept looking.

I even asked again. I visited all the restaurants in the city. Italian, Chinese, Indian, Mexican. I always got turned down. The word spread fast. I continued until late into the night. No luck. Nobody wanted to give me a chance. No one gave me the opportunity to explain why I destroyed those cars. They did not understand that I had changed.

I would be okay with night work, minimum wage, unpleasant colleagues, stressful conditions, but with this?!

There was nothing else left than to find accommodation, or to spend time on the dangerous streets.

From my previous experience, I decided for the second option. I found a small motel near North Moore Street. I paid thirty dollars for the night. The endless silence was interrupted by the sound of the neon lights. The walls looked like they were from the jungle – the green on the walls caused by mold with such a horrible smell. I lied on the bed and was just thinking. I was thinking about my past.

I was thinking about my present. I was thinking about my future.

What will happen to me?

How would I get out of this situation?

I asked myself ...

Fears and regrets dominated my thoughts. I was tired of this nervousness. Everything had happened so fast. Everything went wrong so fast. I really doubted that I could live a normal life like other people.

Be a favored one, have a good job, go out with friends, have a loving woman. You know, live the American dream, or live any dream at all. Instead, I just survived.

No joy in life, no pleasure in life.

Only troubles, sorrows, pain ...

In the morning I handed the keys from my room to the receptionist who was waiting for me to extend my stay, but that was not the case. Only a fool would have stayed there voluntarily. I went to try my luck somewhere else. I had to forget about working in a restaurant. So I tried shops, dry cleaners, laundromats. Without any success.

Surprisingly, all of them knew what I had done in my past. It seemed like all these people – who I had never even met before – knew my life better than I did myself! With no chance to find some job, I simply gave up.

I could have begged, I could have hoped, I could have prayed. Nothing worked. Timothy had made me a pariah.

“What now? What now?” I asked myself.

**M**y ego did not allow me to go back to the shelter to ask the old lady for the possibility of living there again. I just couldn't do it. I needed to solve the situation. I regretted that I spent all my money on unnecessary clothes. I should have saved it. I should have kept it.

For my last fifty dollars, I could have spent the night in that cheap motel but without food. And then what?

Live on the street, like I did with my mother?

A poor beggar?

Thinking about that dark period, a cold sweat overwhelmed me. Never ever again.

I could not allow my past to destroy my future. I could not let other people ruin my life.

I figured it would be best for me to get away from New York. Somewhere where people do not read the New York Post. Somewhere where people are not interested in the past.

Maybe Florida, or California, I was thinking.

Anyhow, I could not decide on an empty stomach. Important decisions require courage, which in my case meant the courage to spend what few dollars I had left. I could get a triple cheeseburger for three dollars at McDonald's. I was hoping that I had just eaten my last meal in that damn city.

I asked the McDonald's cashier a simple question. Where do people go to live a better life? *Clearly Los Angeles*, she answered me.

Los Angeles? For a while, I thought about it. Why not? There at least they have warm weather. No snow. No cold. Right, I had nothing to lose. Unbelievable – not just that I had vanquished my hunger, but I also got the answer I needed.

Thanks to this answer, I decided to go.

I hurried to the nearest bus station where I wanted to buy a one-way ticket to heaven. To Los Angeles.

I almost got a heart attack. They asked for one hundred and fifty-two dollars. One hundred and fifty-two dollars I did not have. My previous begging from strangers on the street for money had killed my pride. I lost all the barriers. Feeling like I lost my conscience, I stopped the cars on the way. I stood in the middle of the road between those iron death traps on wheels,

waving to the drivers hidden behind their windshields. They made their points quite clear. Honking. I tried to stop the passing cars, trucks, buses... no one stopped for me.

Except for the taxi drivers. They thought I needed to be taken somewhere. They were right.

I needed to be taken somewhere, but certainly not in a crazy expensive yellow taxi.

Maybe it was a coincidence and maybe not. The driver of a big blue truck, who almost ran me over, offered me a free ride. In the trailer, he was carrying some electronics to Los Angeles.

I had seen a lot of movies with truckers who murdered innocent hitchhikers. I would be an easy victim. In my current physical and psychological condition, a ten-year-old boy would have killed me. But the bus to Los Angeles was too much. And I couldn't afford to stay here. That truck is my only chance, I thought.

I got into the blue truck, next to a young trucker a little older than me. He looked like he could be thirty years old. After answering a couple of basic questions like:

Do you have a gun on you?

Are you running from the police?

Where's your mom?

Why Los Angeles?

He put on his safety belt, turned on some loud music on the radio and started off. We both did not talk much. Probably we didn't have much to talk about.

He stared ahead, eyes on the road, I looked around at the cars driving at high speeds.

Not only did I save one hundred and fifty-two dollars I did not have, but I was more comfortable than I would have been on the bus. The wide seat gave me more than enough room to sit and sleep.

Millions of people all over the world dream that one day, they can come to New York to live the American Dream. I just prayed that I would never have to go back to New York again.

I did not sleep much in that truck. My body is not made for such long periods of sitting. I was constantly looking for a better position to sit in. My

butt hurt. My legs were stiff. A complete disaster.

We arrived in Los Angeles two days later in the morning. I thought it was about 5 am. The view from the passenger seat fascinated me. I did not know where to look. There was something exciting everywhere. Airplanes flew in the sky. Yachts sailed out at sea. Along the way, exotic cars were driving alongside us. All the houses looked so fancy. I had never seen so much sun in my whole life in New York. I felt like I was in a very luxurious Hollywood movie. The truck driver dropped me off at the bus stop. That heat woke me up. I looked at the city map on the board. I was lost. Literally.

Hundreds of options for where to go, and just one reason why to go there. I looked around. I chose one target. A tall skyscraper with a red banner on the hill behind which I followed. I was totally tired of walking through the empty streets accompanied by my own shadow. Occasionally, a barking dog cut the silence. From the quiet outskirts, I got to the city's busy center.

In New York, people were usually going to work at this time. In Los Angeles, people were returning home from parties.

I needed to relax. Get a bit of strength. I sat down on a wooden bench. After a minute I closed my eyes. My only companions were the singing birds in the surrounding trees. I was woken up by the noise of a car buzzing by on the road. I went to check my bag with my hand, but I was not able to find it. I opened my eyes and my bag wasn't there. Immediately I jumped off the bench and started looking for it. Next to the bench. Beneath the bench. Behind the bench. I could not find it anywhere. Someone had stolen it from me.

To be sure, I checked my wallet in my pocket, and I almost fainted. All my money was gone.

The thief left behind only my ID and one dollar.

Fucking one dollar!

I did not know whether I should cry or laugh.

By the way, I did both.

There was no one who could help me. I came here alone without anything. No family I could stay over with. No friends to support me. No arranged job to get me started.

Totally desperate, I stopped a police car patrolling down a nearby street. Dark bulletproof glasses protected the men of the law. With deep respect and a weird feeling, I knocked on passenger's window. A huge man in uniform

came out of the car. He held his hand on his gun, ready to use it when needed. He checked me strictly and asked me what was happening. I took him to show where they had robbed me. I took no risks this time. I told him nothing but the truth about my forced departure from New York, about sleeping on the bench when they robbed me.

My story made an impression on that tough guy in the uniform. Not only did he buy me a hot dog and Cola, but he and his colleagues gave me some of their own money. Each one gave me ten dollars.

Words could not express my feeling of gratitude. I hugged them from the bottom of my heart.

Many people do not like cops. They judge them. They hate them. I was one of them. I honestly blamed myself for it at the time. The cops helped me many times. At elementary school, when they took me home in their car when I tried to commit suicide, and here in Los Angeles when I almost was stuck on the street without any money. They had done more for me than my father did. For me, these guys are heroes in uniforms. Real heroes. Every day they serve the people of this country. Each day they put their own lives at risk for the security of this country.

Before they got into their car, one of them advised me to be careful. *Young people like you, they see Los Angeles as the home of superstars. But they do not see that most of the city's population lives in poverty. People who struggle for survival do not take care of others. Trust me, I'm a cop. I know what I'm talking about.* He said.

Again, I thanked him for his help. He wished me luck, got into the car and left with the sirens turned off.

The rest of the day I spent on the beach watching people. I focused mainly on one group of people. On the women. Women in bikinis.

In the Bronx, I did not have the chance to see half-naked women. I had never even seen my own mom in her underwear. The view of those angelic creatures brought some peace to my mind. Rarely, some women noticed my attention and greeted me. I tried to pretend this was normal for me, but it really happened for the first time. I sat there like a rock with my cheeks blushing. I had never talked to a woman for more than one minute in my life. Besides my mom and the old lady from the shelter. I had no idea know what to talk about with them. After all, women are not interested in a loser, like I am.

The noise of the talking crowds was replaced by the loudly screaming seagulls flying in the sky like the black helicopters in Black Hawk Down. After sunset, almost everyone returned to their homes to their loving families. Outside were only those who enjoyed the nightlife and those who were fighting for their own lives.

I was not the weird one here. Someone different.

Next to me stood dozens of people just like me, people like you. Without a family. Without a home. Without any money. When I saw some of them just hanging out, I did not want to get any closer to them.

I preferred solitude. I chose one ordinary bench near Santa Monica. I lay on it with closed eyes, listening to the beautiful melody from a nearby restaurant. To be sure, I put my wallet in the back pocket of my jeans. If someone wanted to rob me a second time, he'd have to get me off the bench, which would definitely wake me up.

Maybe I should go to a cheap motel where I could sleep in a soft bed behind a locked door, but you know, nothing's cheap here in Los Angeles. I sacrificed the feeling of comfort. By saving money, I could buy some food. At that moment, the crazy idea of a huge pizza overflowing with ham entered my mind.

That night I did not sleep much. My conscience did not allow me. I had the urge to do something.

Something that would help me to stand on my own legs.

Something that would get me out of the streets.

First, I stopped by the arrogant owner of a souvenir shop. He said no, and I stopped looking for anything further. The fear of rejection was stronger than my desire for a better life. I did not want to listen to those words anymore – with every sentence ending in NO!

**E**ight days after my arrival here in Los Angeles and I was still living on the streets. It did not seem to be change for better over the next few days. Probably being a warrior in Los Angeles wouldn't be that bad. Due to the right weather conditions, it was nice to sleep in the open air.

That evening I needed to go out, to meet other people. If I didn't, I would probably go crazy.

A dark street opposite San Julian Park. This place looked like a gateway to the world where all the local warriors celebrated their escape from reality.

On that street, I saw a bunch of small groups.

Some groups were drinking cheap alcohol.

Some groups were using drugs.

Some groups were fighting.

And some groups were dancing around a burning trash bin.

Only one group, the last one on the corner, looked different. Peace and joy on their faces. Force and wisdom in their words. They stood there like bright stars in the dark sky.

These people radiated an incredible energy. Positive energy. They looked like clerks, wearing dark jeans and blue shirts. Nicely dressed, neat.

I did not have to say anything. They looked at me and invited me to join them. Their group.

I approached them with the expectation that I would be the one who just listens. But instead of listening, I talked. I talked because they asked me to share all the decisions from my past that had brought me to that dark street.



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